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STANDARDIZATION IN ENGLISH

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Among the misfortunes of life as we know it is the fact that benevolent intentions are often permitted to cover a multitude of offenses against the well-being of our fellow-men. With the best of motives, ambitious but inadequately equipped leaders may undertake to assert their authority in political, industrial, or educational life, and quite unconsciously, perhaps, leave a trail of costly mistakes or failure to mark their misguided efforts. They may be practicing accepted virtues that have acquired a certain unction, they may be doing nothing that the sober judgment of their generation would disapprove, yet they rank with the veriest demagogues and marplots because they cannot see beyond the small virtues that engross their immediate attention.

Usually one finds it difficult to persuade his generation to look with critical eyes upon its own favorite assortment of virtues. None the less we should remind ourselves that although so canny and versatile a man as Benjamin Franklin, for example, had the hearty approval of the successful eighteenth-century small shopkeepers for the obvious exhortations to diligence, thrift, prudence, and avoidance of debt that were scattered so generously through the pages of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, these same exhortations would in many cases be rejected as paralyzing influences by twentieth-century leaders of industry and commerce. Because we have become a people of broader vision and are playing a larger part in world-affairs, we are inclined to look with patronizing indulgence on the homely virtues preached by Poor Richard.

In the field of education one of the most questionable of all dubious virtues is standardization. What a fine mouth-filling phrase it is—a word to conjure with! What a weapon it may become in the hand of an insistent supervisor, principal, or department head! If we find it desirable to standardize the gauge of our

railroads, our system of weights and measures, or the keyboards of our typewriters, is it not equally desirable to standardize our courses of instruction, our methods in the classroom, and our systems of rating? Standardization connotes uniformity, which is generally accepted as a noteworthy goal, even though there be those who whisper darkly that in education, at least, uniformity is likely to be the handmaiden of mediocrity.

The reasons for this flippant whisper are not far to seek. Standardization in a very small group might mean that the ideas of a strong leader have been successfully imposed on a relatively weak following. The autocratic mind dictates the procedure; the others take orders. If the directing intelligence is of a high quality the results may be most satisfactory to the small group involved. In larger groups, however, where the educational autocrat may have to engage in a tussle with others of his kind, the outcome may be less desirable. There we match strength against strength, or possibly prejudice against prejudice; in any event, the result is likely to be a colorless compromise—a gradual and partial surrender of divergent ideas until the leaders stand on common ground and give a half-hearted acquiescence to conclusions that satisfy none of them.

What else is to be expected if we undertake standardization on a large scale and under the alluring auspices of a democratic tradition? The demagogue takes his cue from civilized man's recognized weakness for accepting the will of the majority, in the face of the obvious fact that our inert majority is frequently—or, as Bernard Shaw insists, always—wrong. When, after a battle of wits in the arena of a formulating committee, a statement of aims, ideals, or what not is ready for consideration by an educational body in convention assembled, a flat devitalized generality often gets the apathetic assent of an indifferent majority. What has really been gained? Many of those who help to make up such majorities in educational circles are too timid, too uninformed, or too precariously situated to assail the compromised findings of a controlling clique. Whatever sop we may toss to the public, let us at least be honest with ourselves and admit that majority vote at an educational conference is not necessarily the best method of determining pedagogic practice.

In reviewing the course of standardization in English during the past quarter-century or more, we note the influence of the benevolent, but insistent autocrat working here and there under the cover of majority rule. In the formulation of English instruction in the grades he has been really powerful and, on the whole, an instrument of good. In the college and the university he has usually been wise enough to keep hands off; such institutions do not take kindly to the leveling influences of the standardizer. The real battleground has been in the secondary schools—and the war is still on. The struggle has been for national as well as local standardization, but in its larger aspects it has failed, even in so meritorious an undertaking as the recent attempt to standardize grammatical nomenclature. In the distinctive fields of composition and of literature the results have been curiously unlike during the period under review.

At no time was there any significant degree of uniformity in our methods of meeting the problem of English composition. The schools naturally turned to Harvard College for guidance, but even the recognized leadership of Adams Sherman Hill did not bring about uniform practice, in spite of the wide circulation of his books on rhetoric. In the following generation the late Barrett Wendell dominated the scene and laid down a new plan of attack—a conception of the composition problem that was fundamentally different, but Professor Wendell's ideas were more influential in college composition than they were in the secondary curriculum. The later compilers of textbooks in composition followed his basic plan, but the details in each case were those that were prompted by the writer's own experience. None of these brought about anything approaching a standardization of the course in English composition.

There is still ample opportunity for all who aspire to contribute to the methodology of that subject or who feel qualified to devise scales or other standards for rating the results obtained in composition courses. Probably few experienced teachers would welcome a standardization of procedure in English composition courses at this time. The *English Journal* has given wide publicity to the best results developing from actual classroom practice during the

past decade. Much of this material, however, is empirical and reflects the individuality of the writer rather than the working out of generally accepted principles. The able article entitled "For Minimum Standards in English" written by Mr. George F. Reynolds and published in the *English Journal* of June, 1915, emphasized the ineffectual character of much of our effort to teach English composition, yet it was a plea for minimum requirements, not a defense of standardized courses. Prevalent methods of teaching secondary English composition are too divergent to make widespread uniformity either practicable or desirable.

In the field of English literature, on the other hand, the course of events was somewhat different. The precedents established by the prescribed requirements in foreign languages and in mathematics led the college authorities of the late nineteenth century to make equally definite prescriptions of required readings in English literature. For example, the student of a quarter-century ago who was preparing to enter college in 1897 knew exactly what was expected of him by the colleges that had agreed to the Uniform Entrance Requirements in English. He had to study carefully Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Burke's *Conciliation*, Scott's *Marmion*, and Macaulay's *Life of Johnson*—precisely these four and no others. He had to read intelligently six other works, also definitely named without alternatives. A year later there was some change in the program, but again the same number of definitely assigned classics. Ambitious editors were not slow to take advantage of these nation-wide prescriptions. They got promptly to work and "enriched" the texts with such voluminous introductions, notes, and commentary that the very classics were well-nigh throttled in the midst of such illuminating critical apparatus. Secondary-school teachers accumulated files of annual examination papers in English and drilled their pupils on the questions. They made intensive studies of the whims and peculiarities of the examiners in various colleges; some teachers even forecasted the reappearance of certain questions at stated intervals and determined such recurrence with the enthusiasm of astronomers calculating the procession of celestial events. Such a system was bound to be unsatisfactory, but reform was lamentably slow. Today

the students in our preparatory schools have free choice of several classics for careful study in each literary form and the teacher may choose freely from the list. Instead of one particular play by Shakespeare prescribed for intelligent reading, there is now a choice from a list of fourteen. Instead of six prescribed titles by other writers, our present plan permits a choice from over two hundred. In fiction, for instance, a teacher is free to choose from all the novels of Scott, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, and Cooper.

This development of the past quarter-century has not been fortuitous. It not only represents a definite trend away from narrowly prescribed national requirements for college entrance, but meets the larger needs of the many secondary-school pupils who are not going to college—a group that should get intimate acquaintance with the best things in English literature and not waste time on quibbles over obscure passages or the precise significance of obsolete words. Our teachers no longer expect to be called to task if they pass lightly over the allegorical and mythological difficulties of Milton's *Minor Poems* to gain time so that their pupils may enjoy the charm of Kipling, Masfield, or Noyes. We have learned that classes which might rebel at the uncongenial task of making a detailed argumentative analysis of Burke's *Conciliation* may be induced to analyze with pleasure shorter though equally argumentative essays in recent numbers of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Whatever else the quarter-century has brought forth, it has put joy into the heart of the English teacher who is no longer compelled to ram unappetizing literary fare down the throats of unwilling young Americans. The literary banquet of today is rich in variety and sustenance. Whether the methods of alluring the young guest at the feast be simple and direct, or whether they be subtle and persuasive, he can be made to taste, to enjoy, and—greatest achievement of all—to ask for more.

While it is true that the rigid national prescription of twenty-five years ago has given way to a most welcome eclecticism, many teachers are unfortunately familiar with the fact that narrow standardization is still the order of the day in many districts and local units. Here and there superintendents and supervisors still find a given pleasure in the thought that all the English teachers

under their authority are teaching the subject in the manner officially prescribed. Like the French minister of instruction who, after looking at his watch, proudly announced to a visitor that every class in geometry throughout France was at that moment studying the fourth proposition of the second book of Euclid, such supervisors take pride in building up a smoothly operating machine, forgetting the significant fact that any machine, no matter how complicated or ingenious, is always mechanical and devoid of soul.

We seek no quarrel with those who feel justified in standardizing instruction in a subject of relatively fixed and definite content, such as mathematics or the classics. Such standardization becomes dangerous when applied to history and social science; it becomes a menace when applied to English. Our theorists sometimes forget that English is the one subject of instruction that can never be begun at the beginning in our schools. Instruction has to be corrective as well as informative from the first. Even in the grades, where the chief task is to impart the mechanics of writing and the beginnings of literary appreciation, the personal needs of the individual student must be seriously considered. To delegate that important matter to the college means a deplorable shift of responsibility. If we assume the obligation we should at least remember that the teacher who is a mere automaton, following a prescribed course of procedure, rarely inspires his pupils to any notable achievement. Granted that standardizing supervision is usually based on the need for guidance in the case of the less intelligent or less experienced teacher, we may, nevertheless, fairly urge that all instruction should not be brought down to such levels. The recent broadening of the English curriculum demands greater freedom in the classroom. That need is recognized in the National Joint Committee's *Report on the Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools*. Teachers as well as pupils represent the widest range of temperament, tastes, and prejudices. A school district may include schools of most divergent social backgrounds. A large city may really be a group of distinctive communities within a community. Why should our insistent standardizers demand that all sorts and conditions of teachers should instruct in a prescribed manner all sorts and conditions of pupils? Because it is easier to handle

the conventionalized units, because transfers within the district are more readily effected, and because a certain minimum attainment may be taken for granted. A panacea of relatively low standard—a compromise English program—is therefore thrust upon a system whether we are intent upon training the young folk for what we call leadership or merely to live well-ordered and useful American lives.

Does it not seem more reasonable to uphold the thesis that a school or a school system is the more successful in attaining the objectives of its English program in proportion to the responsibility that it places on the individual teachers of this most subjective of studies? If we encourage those active in this work to look upon most of our current procedure as experimental, and to make available their own experiences through the medium of our *English Journal* or other periodicals or in educational conferences, we shall do much to make the autocratic standardizer a thing of unhallowed memory. The best of any teacher's success lies not in the fidelity with which he has followed the syllabus of a prescribed course, but in the results actually obtained. We should not take exception to any objective tests, whether scales, standards, or other methods of measurement, that assure a reasonably fair, impersonal evaluation of the teacher's work. However, such tests cannot be considered reasonably fair unless they take account of the achievement in a comprehensive, inclusive way. In the secondary school they should evaluate not merely spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but command of the vernacular, literary appreciation, originality of treatment, and individuality of style. The very fact that such things are difficult to measure exposes the inadequacy of our present objective standards.

If we can bring ourselves to the point of recognizing that in English instruction, at least, the mania for standardization is the first infirmity of second-rate educational minds, we shall be doing a fine service for the real teachers of English. Our *English Journal* is largely made up of the contributions from able teachers who have had the opportunity to test their ideas in the classroom. No sensible person would exchange such information derived from actual experience for a wilderness of syllabi prepared by the

theorists and the standardizers. In the February, 1921, issue of the *English Journal* we find a vigorous editorial by the president of the National Council, Mr. Harry G. Paul, entitled "On Improving Our Teaching of English." He concedes the remarkable advance in our methods during the past twenty years and looks for even greater progress during the next two decades. His plea is not for sweeping changes in the curriculum, but "for greater power and efficiency in using the materials near at hand." In summing up he shows that

We can accomplish much both for ourselves and for others by a hearty and generous co-operation in the various projects carried on by the National Council and by our various state and local associations. By pooling our experiences and observations, by conducting under widely varying conditions these numerous and valuable experiments, and by passing on our results to the clearing-house of some central committee for discussion and final formulation, we may do our modest bit toward making English the best taught subject in the curriculum.

Most progressive teachers will accept Mr. Paul's findings as sound educational doctrine, but the consummation that he hopes to bring about can only be achieved if those who wield supervisory power over the English teacher can be made to realize the tentative, empirical character of much of our present-day procedure. Those who know may point the way, but we cannot go on until those in authority give the word.